



# Väestöliitto

**Helping the suffering –  
Why Indian new middle classes appear  
indifferent?**

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## Public debate in India

- **'To expect the favoured classes to be altruistic and usher in true modernisation, is somewhat like whistling for the moon. To put it bluntly, the Indian middle class has no desire to alter the pre-modern attitude that exists in India when it comes to relations between people.'** (Dipankar Gupta: *Mistaken Modernity* 2000, p. 21)

## What are 'Indian new middle classes'?

- **Privileged, educated classes?**
- **Education, white collar employment, stable income, consumptive way of life, dependency on the elite, 'decency'**
- **Until 1990s, high dependency on the State, and still to some extent**
- **Value of English language**
- **Despite various estimates, it is impossible to say how many people 'belong to' middle class – 150 or 300 million?**
- **No one middle class, but several middle classes**

## **Socially insensitive middle classes?**

- **Divisions among middle-class people**
- **The old and the new**
- **The birth of the growing new middle class since economic reform in 1990s: Emergence of conspicuous consumption**
- **Moral condemnation by 'old middle class' and intelligentsia**
- **Hindu notion of dharma – absence of universal individual moral code**
- **Notion of karma**
- **Patron-client relationships**

## Middle-class tendencies

- **Isolating middle-class residential areas from the poor: 'beautification' campaigns (Leela Ferdandes)**
- **Strategic use of the principles derived from liberal thinking when it suits one's groups' political ends, while still keeping up with non-liberal, holistic and hierarchical principles in one's own domestic life (Dipankar Gupta)**
- **A feature shared by most social groups in India: helping one's kin and family, no generalized feeling of social community. Influence of caste society.**
- **Common statement: 'the poor and hungry, they are used to it.'**
- **New tendency to blame the victim. Poverty is not thought to be due to lower caste position only but due to ingrained qualities such as lack of talent, combined with moral vices such as laziness and moral laxity.**

## Middle-class tendencies (2)

- **Upwardly mobile middle class people separate themselves most clearly from the labouring class. Need to make the difference.**
- **Among upper middle classes, less need to be strict about the difference. More social distance.**
- **The use of servants a critical moment of creating middle class identity. Personal, intimate interaction in hiring, supervising servants in the domestic sphere. Child care, food, cleanliness. Essential features of middle class belonging.**
- **Common complaint: servants do not stay, demand more wages, are not reliable. Earlier: patron-client relations, now: market exchange.**
- **The importance of moral propriety as a defining feature of belonging**

## What do we expect from the middle class?

- Is middle class *anywhere* a progressive social force? Why should we expect it to be different in India than in, say, Brazil, the US or Finland?
- What is the attitude of the middle classes in Finland towards the less fortunate, poor, alcoholics, mental patient and so on? Do they really care? They are, in a way, paying the state to care and do not want to take responsibility.

## Conclusion

- **Most middle-class people concentrate on improving their own family's economic and social status, no wider political agenda**
- **But: also strong civil society, NGOs, wide and uncensored media**
- **→ Improvements possible but are they probable?**
- **Will middle-class people work towards a more equal society?**



- 'A great many middle-class Indians have consigned the poor to being a fixture on a landscape they do not wish to see. This insensitivity to poverty, specially among the influential, cannot but be an obstacle to the eradication of poverty... (Pavan K. Varma: The Great Indian Middle Class 1998, p. 191)
- Time to give up patronizing attitude to the underprivileged groups – low castes, the poor, women. Fundamentally, they have to fight their own struggle.
- As long as the middle classes are interested in maintaining political democracy, there is scope for improvement, because that makes it possible for the disadvantaged to fight for their own interests